

Milestones Can Be Millstones: But Milestones Can Also Be Millstones

By VINCENT CANBY

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pg. 68

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IS Sidney Poitier obsolete? Can he be worn out at 46 while John Wayne, at 63, rolls on, undiminished, on one lung? That would be a rude question to ask about any conventional movie star, but it can hardly be avoided when an actor, in attaining stardom, has become, for all practical purposes, a political point of view and a social symbol, the sort of actor about whom it was written, not so long ago, that he was a credit to his race.

Poitier is not responsible for the things that people write about him, but an awareness of history does seem to have shaped his career more than has a devotion to the exploration and testing of his own, very real talent. The decision, I feel, has been both conscious and costly. The terrible thing about being a political point of view and a social symbol is that time, even before age, may suddenly overtake you, as it once did the NRA's blue eagle.

The question of Poitier's obsolescence is prompted by

the arrival here last week of his new film, "They Call Me Mister Tibbs!," a sort of non-sequel to the earlier, Oscar-winning "In the Heat of the Night" in which Poitier first played the role of Detective Lt. Virgil Tibbs of Homicide. It is also prompted by a number of other recent events — by movies like Gordon Parks's "The Learning Tree," Melvin Van Peebles's "Watermelon Man," Ossie Davis's "Cotton Comes to Harlem," and by the emergence of major new black actors like James Earl Jones ("The Great White Hope") and Calvin Lockhart who, in three recent films, has been able to play everything from a dedicated school teacher ("Halls of Anger"), to a bogus preacher promoting a Back-to-Africa swindle ("Cotton Comes to Harlem"), and a perennially precious acting student ("Myra Breckinridge") who dusts his hair with sequins.

None of these things could have happened had not Poitier, over the last two decades, in a series of often bad but never insignificant mov-

ies, insinuated his blackness, and the blackness of a large number of other Americans, into the consciousness of a white majority that will never be quite as blind again. Now, however, in one way and another, the revolution has gotten ahead of its leader.

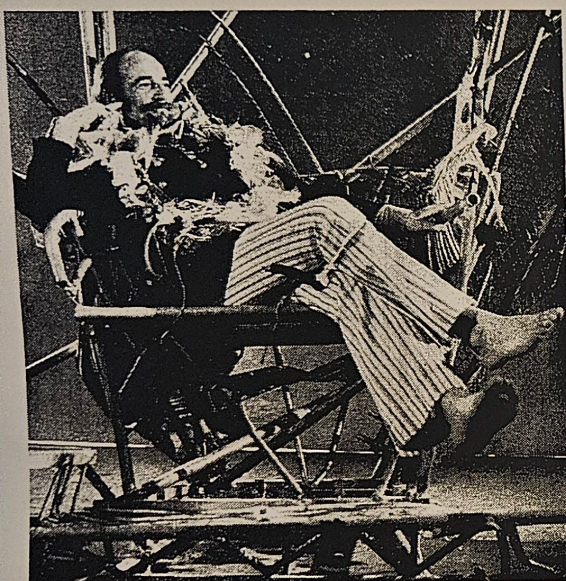
Of the three films by black directors, by far the most popular is the current "Cotton Comes to Harlem," the comic melodrama based on the adventures of Chester Himes's fictional black detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones. As movie art, it's not noteworthy, but it does have something that a large number of patrons, apparently mostly black, can respond to. That is, an exuberant irreverence toward just about everything — including narrative sense, stereotyped racial sensibilities (white as well as black), and virtue (especially as its own reward). Before it collapses into the conventional confusions of cops-and-robbers stuff, "Cotton Comes to Harlem" has more than a few scenes that are very funny and that I now think (with

the privilege of hindsight) may be quite important. I think specifically of a frantic car chase that helps to start the film and that employs, as accessories to the comedy, some Harlem characters whom you probably never saw in a nice, liberal, 1960 movie made with good taste: smug, stingy old ladies, various rummies and junkies and sidewalk con artists, and one long, lean, beautifully eccentric cat who is so bent on picking up two chicks that he is totally unaware of the automobiles and bullets whizzing past.

Watching "Cotton Comes to Harlem" at its best moments is a little like watching Moms Mabley on the stage of the Apollo Theater, recounting a long-ago tea on the White House lawn with Eleanor Roosevelt. It's tough, crude, self-mocking, and triumphantly unafraid. The recent surfacing on national television of Moms, Redd Foxx and Pigmeat Markham, who have been features at the Apollo for decades, is an important aspect of the new

Continued on Page 5

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"THE ARCHITECT AND THE EMPEROR OF ASSYRIA"—Arnold Sobeloff is the enthroned and reflective emperor in the two-character play by Fernando Arrabal, which will have its North American premiere tomorrow at the Stratford, Ont., Festival. The play, a tragic farce, will be in repertory for 11 performances through August 8.

But Milestones Can Also Be Millstones

Continued from Page 1

black freedom, which means the freedom to be visible, to make bad movies, witless movies and vulgar movies, as well as good ones.

The problem with "They Call Me Mister Tibbs" is that it's not only a rather ordinary movie, but it's inhibited by Poitier's own good taste and sense of mission. The actor, who is very much a product of the 1950's and 1960's, continues to make milestones, instead of real movies. In the past, those milestones, have been important as Poitier, a kind of black superman, moved from "The Defiant Ones," to "Lilies of the Field," "A Patch of Blue," "In the Heat of the Night," "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," "For Love of Ivy" and "The Lost Man," (which attempted, mildly, to make black militancy comprehensible). "They Call Me Mister Tibbs" is another milestone movie: it's the first major Poitier film in which his blackness is never mentioned.

It is, instead, the story of

a brilliant, hard-working San Francisco detective assigned to solve the murder of a call girl whose great and good friend (and chief suspect in the case) is a white, politically active Protestant minister, who also happens to be Poitier's best friend. At this point, I'm not concerned about the quality of the movie (mediocre murder mystery). I am concerned, or, at least, interested, in what it means in terms of Poitier's career. For Poitier, the movies' prototype black man, has come full circle: his blackness is now invisible.

This, it seems to me, is a nice, typically 1950ish notion of achievement, a hold-over from the time when it was believed that all problems could be solved simply by legislating integration. Won't it be nice, we thought, when you can cast black actors, in what might ordinarily be white roles, in plays and movies and nobody will pay any attention to their blackness? Richard Rodgers did it in "No Strings" (1963), and everyone concerned received

good conduct points. It was and is a real advance in terms of employment opportunities for black actors, but, carried to the extreme, it will mean nothing less than a denial of an entire cultural heritage.

Thus my very mixed feelings about Poitier's achievement in "They Call Me Mr. Tibbs." He has earned the right to make movies as foolish and inconsequential as any ever made by Frank Sinatra, or any other major white movie star, but I can't be extremely happy when he exercises the right and, at the same time, becomes invisible. In "They Call Me Mister Tibbs" he has a beautiful black wife (Barbara McNair) and two beautiful black children and they live in the sort of beautiful, impersonally decorated, upper-middle-class house you can see in any TV situation comedy. Except for some black bit players and extras, almost everyone else in the movie is white, including the playmate of Poitier's son. And, as far as can be seen, Poitier and his wife have no connection

to anything resembling a black community. In fact, they have no friends at all, except for the crazy, mixed-up Protestant preacher.

It may be properly argued that race should be of no more concern in something like "They Call Me Mister Tibbs" than it was in, say, "Tony Rome." That's quite true, but it still seems an awful waste of an important national resource (for acting talent is a national resource) to see Poitier playing in this kind of denatured claptrap. He is a big box-office draw, the architect of his own career, and he can be held responsible for, among other things, the hiring of mediocre directors on the order of Gordon Douglas, the man who directed "Mister Tibbs" and whose chief claim to immortality is the fact that he was director-in-residence to Frank Sinatra during the production of "Tony Rome," "Lady in Cement" and "The Detective."

Everything could be forgiven if "Mister Tibbs" had the drive of something like

"Mannix" or the appreciation of banalities that once made Jack Webb's "Dragnet" so funny. It has neither, nor does it have a fraction of the zest of "Cotton Comes to Harlem" (but then zest has never been much in evidence in any Poitier film). I can't help but feel that Poitier himself must feel that his life role as First Major Black Movie Star has severely limited his choice of movie roles and the scope of his career. Towards the end of "Mister Tibbs," the murderer pleads with the detective to delay the arrest 24 hours. Poitier turns away, exhausted and sad, and says simply: "I'm tired of playing God," and you suspect that perhaps he'd like to be free enough to play something as wild and flamboyant as Calvin Lockhart's swindler in "Cotton."

Because he has so consciously designed his later movies as steps-in-the-right-direction, Poitier must accept the charge that in "Mister Tibbs," he seems to have stepped out of the race completely.

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